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## **Teaching Basic Skills: Efforts Intensify to Teach Youngsters to Read**

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Reading is the first of the “Three R’s” for good reason. How well a child learns to read by the third grade will in large measure determine future achievement across the curriculum. There simply is no more important mission for educators during the early elementary years than teaching children to read.

This obvious truth is at the heart of the study of reading instruction begun last month by the Board of Education under the leadership of President Mark Christie. A hard look at reading instruction is necessary because despite the adoption of sound reading standards, and the implementation of diagnostic and intervention programs, many Virginia children still are not learning to read.

But before we explore the state of reading instruction in Virginia today, a little history is in order.

During the early 1990’s, the reading scores of Virginia students on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) were in free fall. This assessment, often referred to in the media as “The Nation’s Report Card,” provides a means for comparing the achievement of students from state to state. In 1994, Virginia had the dubious distinction of recording the sharpest drop in reading achievement on this test in the nation. This plunge in reading achievement served as a wake-up call and was a significant factor in the launching of standards-based reform in the Commonwealth.

### **Reading Wars Raged**

The early and mid-90’s were turbulent times in public education in Virginia. A parent-led backlash was underway against the hard-to-define philosophy of “outcome based” education that was then in vogue. The “reading wars” also were raging, with advocates of phonics striving to topple the “whole language” regime that held sway in many school divisions.

These controversies were subsumed by the debate over the Standards of Learning (SOL), which the state school board approved in 1995. Looking back, it is amazing that clear-headed, standards-based reform survived this period. That it did was due to the fact that the evidence was clear, from the NAEP and other indicators of student achievement, that Virginia’s children were being ill-served by the pre-SOL status quo.

Virginia students have made tremendous progress since the adoption of the SOL. In mathematics, the achievement of students on the Algebra I & II and Geometry tests has refuted the skeptics of the '90's who warned that these tests would present too high a barrier to graduation.

Progress in reading has been encouraging, but less than expected given the heavy emphasis Virginia has placed on early reading instruction. While the percentage of third-graders who passed their SOL math tests rose from 63 percent in 1998 to 77 percent in 2001, the pass-rate for third-grade reading rose only 10 points during this period, from 55 to 65 percent. This means that 35 percent of the commonwealth's third grade students are not acquiring the reading skills necessary for success.

## **Identifying Poor Readers**

The failure rate in third-grade reading remains unacceptably high despite intensive efforts to identify children who are struggling and provide the extra instruction they need to become competent readers. In 1997, the General Assembly approved the Virginia Early Reading Intervention Initiative. The center-piece of the initiative is a state-wide assessment known as PALS developed by the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. "PALS" stands for Phonological Awareness and Literacy Screening. PALS is used by teachers to identify children who need additional reading instruction. The PALS test can tell teachers why a child isn't learning to read, and by visiting the PALS Web site, teachers can access lessons and activities tailored to the needs of their struggling students. In short, PALS is a powerful tool for identifying and correcting early reading problems.

Unfortunately, many schools have not taken full advantage PALS. Only about half of the kindergarteners identified in the fall as needing additional reading instruction are able to pass the PALS test in the spring. What about the half whose instructional needs were not addressed? What kind of instruction and intervention did they receive? Why do so many Virginia children need intervention in the first place? Are all teachers in Virginia teaching the skills children must possess to become competent readers?

The final question is especially important in schools with large numbers of children in poverty. Many of these children aren't exposed to early-childhood experiences that promote reading readiness. Their vocabularies are often limited, and unlike children who are accustomed to being read to, they haven't learned to associate sounds with letters or grasped the concept that letters represent sounds which form words that are read from left to right. These children desperately need reading instruction that is based on scientific evidence about how children actually learn to read.

## Learning Begins Young

And that evidence is that reading is a skill that must be taught. As G. Reid Lyon, one of the nation's most prominent reading researchers, told the board's committee studying reading instruction last month, even children who seem to learn to read "naturally" are actually the beneficiaries of several years of informal but repeated instruction in the home. Parents who regularly read to their preschool-aged children lay the ground work for reading success often without knowing it. By reading stories aloud, they teach their children that speech is comprised of sounds that express different ideas depending on how they are combined and that these sounds are represented by letters and combinations of letters that form words. It is a complicated concept that is understood over time as parents point out letters and pronounce words in the text. A child being read to watches as the parent's eyes move across the page, or follows a finger that moves from left to right, top to bottom. Vocabulary expands as the parent explains unfamiliar words.

Any study of how reading is taught in the commonwealth's 1,100 elementary schools must include an examination of how Virginia's teacher education programs prepare teachers to teach reading and whether these programs are based on what we know about how children actually learn to read. If all is well, why is Virginia spending so much to teach our teachers how to teach reading? Why are so many children whose deficiencies are detected through the PALS test still struggling after receiving intervention? These questions must be addressed if Virginia is to meet the reading goals of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

This is not about re-fighting the reading wars of the last few decades. It is about making sure that all of our elementary teachers are properly equipped to teach the skill upon which virtually all future learning and achievement rests. Children don't have the luxury of waiting while educators engage in debates that are now moot. They want to learn to read. Let's teach them.

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